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ABSTRACT

Many view the problem of violence as not merely a school problem, but as a much larger community problem that is finding its way into the schools. As a society, in addition to teaching our children how to be violent, we are giving them the tools of violence. There are steps that school board members can take to establish and maintain control of violence in schools. The first step is to develop an overall plan for school discipline and safety by collecting information and statistics to define the problem. Citizen advisory groups can be valuable sources of information and support. Areas for attention in developing policies regarding school violence include the curriculum, workshops for adults, extracurricular activities for students, and clearly stated rules and regulations. Examples are cited of school districts' approaches to violence. (MLF)

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Violence and our schools: what can we do?

by Walt Landen

The statistics are startling!

- One in 20 students will bring a gun to school at least once a month according to a U.S. Centers for Disease Control report, Fall 1991 (*Teacher Magazine*, January 1992).
- Violent assaults in schools escalated 14 percent from 1987 to 1990 (*Education USA*, October 14, 1991).
- 91,000 of the 2.2 million classroom teachers were attacked in 1987, according to a National Education Association poll (*Executive Educator*, October 1988).
- 28 percent of teachers in a National Center for Education Statistics survey reported physical conflict among students ("Teachers Survey on Safe, Disciplined, and Drug-Free Schools," 1990-91; *Education Daily*, December 5 1991).
- 25 percent of 12th graders admitted that they had been threatened with violence and 14 percent were injured in school according to the 1991 National Education Goals Report for 1990 (*Education USA*, October 14, 1991).

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The headlines in daily newspapers are equally alarming:

"Schools Feel Impact of Armed Teens" — *Washington Post*, October 9, 1991

"Fear, rage follows school rape" — *Chicago Tribune*, February 15, 1992

"Why Are Children Turning to Guns?" — *Education Week*, November 6, 1991

"2 teenagers shot to death in Brooklyn school" — *New York Times*, February 27, 1992

America's violence has found its way into the schools and students, teachers, and education are suffering because of it.

Not Just an Urban Problem Anymore

Though large urban areas still experience the greatest incidence of crime in the schools, a study by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development reports "...youth violence has no geographic limitations...It occurs much less frequently, but most often with greater impact, in suburban, small towns and rural areas." Reports from selected school districts indicate the numbers of students in rural areas disciplined for possessing firearms nearly tripled over a one year period. (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, October 1989).

Many view the problem not as merely a school problem, but as a much larger community problem that is finding its way into the schools. Catherine Hobbs, vice president of the Montgomery County School Board, feels that "...what we are seeing in schools is representative of what is happening in society. Schools are not a haven of safety." This sentiment is reiterated by R. David Hall, president of the Washington, D.C., Board of Education. "Schools are not an island, they are a reflection of the community. You can't dump students in school and say 'you teach them different values' than they learned at home or in the community."

It's obvious violence is a serious problem. Understanding the causes is crucial to determining appropriate solutions. One apparent cause of violence is that children are exposed to it as a means for resolving problems. The news is filled with stories of individuals and groups who resort to violence for personal or political/social gain. Movies and television shows glorify the use of violence. Popular Saturday morning cartoon characters no longer just hit and yell at one another; they use modern and space-age weapons to maim and kill each other. And for increasing numbers of our urban poor children, violence and death are part of daily life.

We are teaching our children to be violent. *The Harvard Education Letter*

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has stated that experts believe "...the capacity for violence may be inborn, [however] children learn to be aggressive" (*The Harvard Education Letter*, July 1991). The best of intentions, in offering conflict-resolution and self-esteem building classes in our schools, in providing counseling services to students and their families, and even in punishing unacceptable behavior will not be effective until we change societal attitudes and conduct.

As a society, in addition to teaching our children how to be violent, we are giving them the tools of violence. The national statistic that one in 20 students will carry a gun to school once a month is supported by a recent study conducted by the Iowa Department of Education that revealed that 23 percent of the 1,773 high school students surveyed carry a gun, knife or club to school. In many instances, we are supplying these weapons to our children. The gun-per-residence ratio in the United States is 2:1 (*Eric Digest*, October 1991). Students have access to these weapons at home, and guns arrive at school for show and tell, for security, as power symbols, and to enact revenge.

A growing number of children say that they carry weapons as a means of self-defense. They are not the perpetrators, but the victims, of violence. These children are going to school scared — or they are not going at all. The *Set Straight on Bullies* survey, conducted by the National School Safety Center, indicates that some 800,000 students stay home one day a month out of fear (*CABE Journal*, March 1990).

The growing emphasis in education on the whole child and the linkage of services to meet children's multiple needs includes the safety and well-being of our students. When talking about the holistic approach to education, it is important to recall that the term is an all-encompassing one. A frightened child cannot learn any better than an unhealthy child.

The School Board's Role

School Board members have an impact beyond their roles as education policymakers. As community leaders, Board members have the opportunity and responsibility to influence community standards and behaviors, particularly as these relate to their schools. The issues of violence and its control, and the availability and responsible possession use of weapons are increasingly critical to the community's ability to provide a safe and secure learning environment for its children.

While the charge to serve as influencers of public policy is part of the school Board member's mandate, primary responsibility remains the effective conduct of the education system. In that regard, there are steps that Board members can take to establish and maintain control of violence in school.

Taking Charge

Recognition of the existence of or potential for violence is the first step. Admitting that we have a problem does not mean that we have, in some way, failed. Quite the contrary. Identifying an actual or possible problem says that we have the foresight, knowledge, and planning skills that are part of the portfolio of the effective school board member and administrator.

The sixth National Education Goal for the year 2000 acknowledges the problem of violence in the public schools and serves to direct our attention to its solution.

By the year 2000, every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning.

The community, in general, and the school staff, in particular, depend upon the leadership of their school Board to address and help solve the problem of school violence. Open discussions with community members and school personnel are the beginnings of the planning process. The need to involve everyone in a cooperative effort to prevent violence and provide a safe and secure environment in our schools is highlighted by a U.S. Department of Education survey that reported that 25 percent of the teachers polled had thought about leaving their jobs for safety reasons (*Executive Educator*, October 1988).

"All well and good," I hear you saying, "but what can/should our school Board do, immediately and specifically?" Following are some recommendations for implementing a plan to take charge. First and foremost, if you do not currently have a school violence problem, do not wait until you do to develop the policies and procedures you will need. Metal detectors, drug and weapon-sniffing dogs, security personnel, and restrictive rules and regulations are not solutions — they are techniques to handle the problem on an ad hoc basis. School Boards may have to employ some, or all, of these measures to regain control, but they also need to develop an overall plan for school discipline and safety.

Define the Problem

Collect information and statistics so that you know what you are dealing with. Community involvement is an important element in assessing need and developing the means for meeting the need. Citizen advisory groups or task forces, composed of members of local

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business, religious and civic organizations; municipal agencies; and parents can be valuable sources of information and support. School violence is a community issue and demands community investment in developing effective solutions.

Review District Policies
Are your policies updated and appropriate for current, as well as anticipated, situations? Do they give clear guidance to the administration for providing a disciplined and secure learning environment? (See section on Developing Policies Regarding School Violence: Areas for Attention) Do they reflect advice from legal counsel concerning the school's and school Board's liabilities? Be sure to check your state laws; you may be held in violation for failing to provide and maintain safe schools. Your Board needs to know what you can do to assure that all reasonable precautions have been taken.

Develop a Plan for Establishing Discipline and Maintaining Order
Your plan should include policies regarding searches and seizures, expulsion, cooperative agreements with law enforcement agencies. Dependent on circumstances, it might include installing metal detectors and/or hiring professional security personnel. The plan also should include provision of training for the entire school staff in how to deal with a variety of emergencies. Fire drills and safety procedures are not adequate in today's schools. Training in recognizing and responding to danger signals, good communication systems/arrangements within the school, and clear understanding of each person's responsibility in a crisis are vital.

Cultivate an Emotionally Healthy School Environment
Get to know, and encourage your administrators to know, the schools' staffs and students. Provide the support and education/training needed by both staff and students to resolve conflicts. Insist on fair, consistently enforced rules for behavior. Reward good behavior. And, at risk of mentioning the obvious, remember that a smile and a kind word go a long way.

Developing Policies Regarding School Violence: Areas for Attention

Curriculum. Curriculum changes can serve as a multi-faceted approach to dealing with school violence. Curriculum can be used as a prevention tool and as a means of influencing student knowledge and attitude. Classes emphasizing conflict resolution skills can give students the capacity to solve problems logically and peacefully, diminishing violent behaviors. Effective Alternatives in Reconciliation Services (EARS) is an example of a program that offers that ability. Developed in New York City, this program is designed to encourage talking rather than fighting. The program works much like labor union negotiations, in that students who have disputes meet with specially trained student mediators and talk out their differences (*New York Times*, December 26, 1990).

A comparable program, "Violence Prevention Curriculum for Adolescents," generated by Deborah Prothrow-Stith, instructs students in "...anger management and nonviolent problem-solving techniques" (*Eric Digest*, October 1991). Curriculum also is being used to educate students about the dangers of substance abuse, a frequent cause of violence. Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) is a popular program that involves police officers who have been trained for classroom teaching in instructing students on how to identify and resist the temptation to experiment with drugs and alcohol.

Workshops for Adults. Adults who discourage aggression and support logical problem-solving afford children a strong foundation in avoiding violence and physical conflict. In the **Beverly, Massachusetts, School District**, school and health service personnel recently presented a workshop entitled "Parents Need to Know." Parents and the community-at-large were encouraged to come and participate in workshops designed to provide information about and techniques for encouraging children to utilize problem-solving approaches.

Within the school, inservice training for teachers and school staff might include site security measures, student discipline and classroom management, conflict resolution techniques, and implementation of character development curricula. Through effective school leadership training, principals and other administrators can develop the skills to effect changes in their schools and to enhance the positive elements in their school environments.

Extra-curricular Activities for Students. Academic and social clubs and school-sponsored athletics are excellent ways of increasing student participation and investment in their schools, as well as promoting desirable concepts like sportsmanship and the benefits of team/group activities. Developing after-school programs for latchkey students can provide guidance and structure for children who would, otherwise, be unsupervised.

School Boards may want to consider cooperative agreements with community groups to offer activities for students. What happens outside school comes to school. Therefore, we need to be concerned about the activities that students participate in during their out-of-school time. "Safe Streets," in Tacoma, Washington, is an example of a program developed by a coalition of school officials, police, and community leaders. Designed to attack the growing youth violence in the city, it was founded on the belief that "...the community can achieve success if its various elements work together with determination and good sense" (*American School Board Journal*, October 1990). Developing programs in conjunction with local business may allow high school students to be engaged in the

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working world and to learn about responsibility and potential professions. These programs should, however, be constructed and regulated so that in-school learning does not suffer.

Clearly Stated Rules and Regulations

- *Dress Codes.* School boards are considering policies establishing dress codes for students and staff. In California, the **Oakland Board of Education** banned "...clothing and jewelry denoting identification with a gang; expensive jogging suits frequently worn by members and drug dealers, and all hats and headgear and clothing designating membership in non-school organizations" (*New York Times*, January 22, 1992). The **Detroit (Michigan) City Schools** have implemented a complete ban on expensive clothes and jewelry. **Baltimore (Maryland) City Schools** are experimenting with school uniforms. The **Dallas (Texas) Board of Education** has adopted a policy opposing clothing and grooming that is deemed distracting or disruptive. The policy gives principals discretion to judge what is inappropriate.

  While dress codes remain controversial as a means of controlling unwanted behaviors, proponents suggest that these guidelines result in fewer behavioral problems and a safer academic environment (*Newsweek*, November 27, 1989). Even though the courts have tended to rule that students do not have a constitutional right to dress or wear their hair any way they choose, school Boards should be prudent in implementing dress codes. Policies must be clearly stated, issued with reasonable notice to allow students to comply, and allow for minimal due process before students are disciplined for violations.

- *Weapons Possession.* It may seem obvious that school is no place for weapons, but the statistics — and our classroom teachers — tell us that weapons are in schools. It is incumbent upon school Boards to state in their policies why weapons will not be tolerated, what constitutes a weapon, and what will result from violation of the policy forbidding weapons. Following is a concise policy statement suggested in NSBA's National Education Policy Reference Manual:

"The Board of Education determines that possession and/or use of a weapon by a student is detrimental to the welfare and safety of the students and school personnel within the district. Possession and/or use of any dangerous or deadly weapon in any school building on school grounds, in any school vehicle, or at any school-sponsored activity is prohibited. Such weapons include but are not limited to any pistol, revolver, rifle, shotgun, air gun or spring gun; slingshot; bludgeon; brass knuckles or artificial knuckles of any kind; knives having a blade of greater than two inches, any knife the blades of which can be opened by a flick of a button or pressure on the handle, or any pocketknife where the blade is carried in a partially opened position.

The possession or use of any such weapon will require that the proceedings for the suspension and/or expulsion of the student involved will be initiated immediately by the principal."

School Boards might consider making their schools weapon-free zones. Efforts to do so would ideally involve the school, home, community, law enforcement and health services. Strategies would include apprehension, prevention, intervention, education, counseling, and student and public awareness programs.

- *Search and Seizure.* Many school Boards have policies that allow locker, desk, and/or vehicle searches. Districts that implement such methods usually inform students that lockers, desks, and parking lots are the property of the school and are subject to search. Some districts advise students when a search will be conducted; some require the student's presence if an article is going to be seized. Search and seizure policies and procedures can indicate determination on the administration's part to control violence and may reduce the number of students bringing weapons and illegal substances to the school.

  When developing policies that address this issue, it is a good idea to provide clear guidance concerning their use. Searches and seizures must meet the standard of "reasonable suspicion" or "probable cause." In the words of the courts, they must be reasonable in inception and scope. That is, are there reasonable grounds for suspecting that a search will turn up evidence of a violation? Are the search and seizure measures reasonably related to the objectives of the search, and not excessively intrusive? Before instituting these measures, be confident that they are warrented by the prevalence and seriousness of the problem, that there is a need for immediate action, and consider the value and reliability of the information leading to suspicion.

- *Graffiti.* A simple, but important means of controlling misbehavior is attention to symbols. Immediate clean-up of graffiti is one way to send a signal to students that the administration is strong and uncompromising in its position on vandalism. It also prevents conflict over potential gang territory. And, it says to all students and staff: We care about you and your safety, and we are taking steps to protect you.

- *Beepers and Pagers.* With the exception of those students who have severe medical problems

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requiring emergency pagers, or those who are members of volunteer rescue units, there would seem to be no need for a youngster to possess a beeper. Police officials maintain that, more often than not, children with beepers or pagers are involved in illicit drug trafficking. School Boards can limit undesirable activities by adopting policies to ban these devices.

School Design. School design and facility use that are flawed can allow, even encourage, unwanted behaviors. School policy can address building deficiencies by restricting student congregation in "blind spots;" recommending random security patrol of problem areas, such as restrooms, locker rooms, and parking lots; and increasing physical security with fences, lights, or metal detectors. Perhaps the most effective, and the least costly, security measure is staff visibility: When teachers and administrators are seen throughout the buildings and on the school grounds, disruptive students are less likely to engage in inappropriate behaviors and everyone feels safer.

Reward Reporting. Encourage students to report weapons and other violations. Tips from students are among the most effective ways to detect weapons and drugs in schools and to be alert to potentially violent situations. Schools might establish a hotline or peer counseling program that would allow reporters to remain anonymous. Whatever the approach, it is important to try to change perception of individuals who report from "tattletales" to heros. Teachers can play a significant role in developing a sense of responsibility among students to report weapons, and they can reinforce the idea that those who report weapons are actually doing themselves and everyone, including the students with weapons, a favor.

It is part of the education and prevention process to continually send messages to all students that their fellow students and teachers are not going to tolerate behavior that is counter-productive to education. School policy should promote commendation of individuals for combatting crime and violence. When possible, public rewards for citizenship and/or bravery could be presented to deserving students and school personnel. When public announcement is not possible, school Board members and administrators can privately recognize those who have acted responsibly.

A Final Word

Increased searches, metal detectors, extra security, and dress codes are extreme measures for extreme conditions. While they are increasingly necessary measures, they will not solve the problem of school violence by themselves. To be effective, we have to combine control and prevention. Choosing curricula, providing staff training, and planning for crisis management are integral components of a school violence program. And, in the end, sound policy development is a school system's best prevention and control mechanism. ■